

Answers To Questions A  
District Commissioner  
Must Know

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# **Answers to Questions A District Commissioner Must Know**

## **Preview**

A District Commissioner should always be asking, "What type of job am I doing?" District Commissioners should be asking this question continually. Key self-evaluation questions are:

- How strong are the units in my District?
- Who do I have as Unit Commissioners and which units are they assigned to?
- Is the relationship between the Unit Commissioner and the unit an effective one?
- Where do I recruit new Unit Commissioners?

This document will provide some helpful instruction on these topics and other issues related to a healthy, thriving District Unit Commissioner corp.

## **How Strong Are The Units In The District?**

### ***How Many Units Are In The District And How Strong Are They?***

First, arrange a meeting with the District Executive and quickly review each unit. Categorize the units in the following manner: strong, average, weak and dead. Once the status of each unit has been determined, immediate attention should be given to the weak and dead units. Units that are average or strong need to be monitored but are not endangering the immediate over-all health of the District.

Key vital signs that can determine the strength of the unit are:

- What is the retention of the unit?
- How well does the unit recruit?

- Is there adult leadership?
- Is the unit a one-man show?
- Are the parents involved?
- Is there troop youth leadership?
- Does the unit have a planned program?
- Does the unit have discipline?
- Is the unit meeting?
- Is the chartered organization leader unhappy with the unit?
- Is there poor communication or adult conflict in the unit?
- Has the unit's charter lapsed?<sup>(1)</sup>

Each of these vital areas needs to be examined to determine the strength of the unit.

**Retention** is an important area to watch. A unit should, at the very least, be maintaining their youth numbers and should be growing. If the unit is not growing, it must be determined why. Sometimes the answer may be as simple as another unit has started, and some of the boys have transferred to the new unit. This could be for a number of reasons; the new unit is closer to home; they have friends in that unit; the families have an association with the new charter partner. Another reason for a drop in retention may be a major manpower reduction in the area such as a military base reorganizing or an industry shutting down. This can cause a reduction in available youth. If there are no outside causes, the unit may be in trouble.

**Recruitment** goes hand in hand with retention. A unit that has a year round recruiting program will be stronger than a unit which does sporadic recruiting.<sup>(2)</sup> They may only do one yearly School Night for Scouting in conjunction with a school open

house and expect everyone to be there and all excited about the program. This may generate a few possible unit members, but generally will not replenish the number of members that have moved on to the next level of scouting, dropped out of the program or moved out of the area.

For troops that do not have an active recruiting program, another potential problem may be a sister pack that is not functioning at full speed. If a troop relies on this method as their only recruiting tool, they may experience some years when there are no boys transitioning from the pack. Most troops can survive one year of no growth, but if this trend continues, the troop could be heading for real problems.

**Adult Leadership** - Parent involvement is a key factor in a healthy unit. A unit with low or no adult leadership or a one-man show is a unit that may be in trouble. The unit may be able to survive for a short period of time, but is in for long-term problems. Active leaders are the key ingredients to a strong unit. The more people involved, the more the workload can be spread out. This also keeps the parents involved in the unit.<sup>(3)</sup>

**Boy Lead Troops** - Troops should be boy-operated with the adults advising. If the adults try to run all aspects of the program and planning, the boys will lose interest and membership could suffer.<sup>(4)</sup> The reason the Boy Scouts' program was set up this way is to give the young scouts a chance to learn leadership. There will be some mistakes made by the scouts, but this can be a learning experience. For the units that are not youth-ran, the Unit Commissioner has a real challenge. A review of key leaders and the "trained" status may shed some light on the reason the troop is not being boy-lead. If the leaders have not completed training, they may not know the correct way to implement the

program. This would require the Unit Commissioner to tactfully advise the Unit Leader about the importance of trained leaders and to get them to training.

**Program Planning** – Planning is also a key ingredient for a strong unit. Planning is done in two steps. First is long-term planning and second is short term planning.<sup>(5)</sup>

For Packs, the Unit Committee along with the Unit Leaders will plan a program for one year. This will involve selecting the theme for each month (Program Helps alleviate the need to start from scratch on themes), assigning committee members to chair such events as recruiting night, Blue & Gold Dinner, Pinewood Derby, Pack graduation and the summer program. Once a long-term program has been established, then the unit can work the short-term plan. This planning is usually done at the monthly committee meetings.

Troops have basically the same steps except the Patrol Leader Council will do the planning at a special long-term planning meeting. Once the Patrol Leader Council has established what they feel is a good long-term plan, the Senior Patrol Leader will take the plan to the Unit Committee for approval. Short-term planning will be handled at the monthly Patrol Leader Council meeting.

By having a planned program, a unit is able to give the youth a quality program and keep interest up.

**Discipline** can be a major problem in a unit.<sup>(6)</sup> This can affect the units' meetings along with recruiting. Discipline is not just a youth problem. Correcting any discipline problem is important and should be handled quickly. If the Unit leader does not correct the problem, this may be a sign of an ineffective leader or the lack of support of the unit committee. Either of these problems can bring a unit to its knees quickly. A unit may

want to establish an adhoc committee to address discipline issues. This alleviates taking the in-depth problem to the entire unit committee. It provides some safeguards for the youth in that the entire committee is not passing a possible judgment on the youth. This committee shouldn't contain more than a few members.

**Not Meeting -** Units or dens that have stopped meeting are “red flags” and need to be looked at closely. This is a sign that a unit may be dying.<sup>(7)</sup> There may be many reasons why a unit is not meeting. One may be the leadership left without recruiting their replacements, or the unit may have lost its meeting place. Whatever the reason, action needs to be immediate. The Unit Commissioner needs to contact the charter organization and unit committee to resolve the problem. It is very important to involve the charter organization because the unit belongs to them, and it is their responsibility to approve all adult leaders and furnish a meeting place.

**Charter Organization -** Is the Charter Organization unhappy with the unit? This is a major problem that needs to be addressed right away.<sup>(8)</sup> The Unit Commissioner, Assistant District Commissioner, District Commissioner or District Executive may need to handle this problem. It is best to have the problem handled at the lowest level, but in some cases, assistance from others in the Unit Commissioner's “chain of command” may be needed.

The problem could be the charter organization does not know what their responsibilities are. If that is the problem, the District Executive should offer some training to bring them up to speed. If there is a problem between the charter organization and the unit, some members of the unit may need to be replaced. This is the responsibility of the charter organization. In some cases, the charter organization may no longer wish

to charter the unit. If this is the case, then the Unit Commissioner needs to inform the Assistant District Commissioner, District Commissioner and District Executive so a new chartering organization can be found.

**Communication** - Does the unit have poor communication? Is there adult conflict within the unit? Without good communication, the unit will have trouble functioning. Leaders, parents and the youth need to know what's on the schedule of events for the unit including the time and place. A monthly calendar and unit roster will help with the communication.

Adult conflict within a unit can make life for all involved with that unit less than pleasant. The unit committee should make the first step to attempt to resolve the conflict. If the unit committee is unable to resolve the problem, then the issue should be brought to the attention of the charter organization. It would be their responsibility to handle the problem.

**Lapsed Charter** -- Finally, a unit whose charter has lapsed is a unit in real trouble. Everyone from Unit Commissioner to the District Commissioner including the District Executive should be involved in saving this unit. **“The most important annual task of a commissioner is to facilitate a prompt renewal of a unit’s charter. It’s a renewal of a contract with the charter organization to provide the Scouting program for another year. It’s the continuation of Scouting values for the boy or young adult in one of your units.”**<sup>(9)</sup> A unit without a charter is not active. This means they cannot have advancement, which will affect the youth.

For the dead and weak units, the first step is to get the Charter Partner involved. This is important because the unit belongs to them, and they should have a vested interest



in it. Some areas the Charter Partner has direct control over are the selection and retention of leadership. The Charter Partner has access to other resources outside the unit that they may bring in to help. In this case, training needs to be offered as soon as possible.

### ***Do the units have a Unit Commissioner assigned?***

Once the problems have been identified, the unit should put together a plan of action to correct the problems. It is very important that the unit devise the plan, not the commissioner staff. Commissioners are there to assist the unit with ITS problems, not to tell them what to do. Once the strength of a unit has been determined, check to see if the unit has a Unit Commissioner assigned. "A unit commissioner is important to the health and growth of a unit".<sup>(10)</sup> If the unit does not have a unit commissioner, your top priority will be to get them a Unit Commissioner. If there is a unit commissioner assigned, is the unit commissioner doing the job?

## **Whom Do I Have Assigned As Commissioners?**

### ***Is The Unit Commissioner Doing His/Her Assignments?***

One of the first things a District Commissioner should understand is they cannot do everything by themselves. It is very important to put together a strong commissioner staff. This staff should consist of one or more Assistant District Commissioner(s) and Unit Commissioners.<sup>(11)</sup> In an ideal situation, you should have a ratio of one unit commissioner to every two or three units.

Now that a need for a commissioner staff has been established, review of the current commissioners should be next. Some questions the district Commissioner Should ask themselves are:

- “Is this person doing his/her assignments?”
- Does this person know what the job expectations are?
- Is he/she trained?
- Is he/she getting along with the units they are assigned to?
- Is he/she the right person to be assigned to this unit?
- Finally, does this person have a vested interest in the unit?

***Does The Unit Commissioner Need To Be Reassigned Or Relieved?***

Once these questions have been answered, you will be able to determine if the position and the commissioner are a match. If the answer is yes, go on to the next unit. If the answer is no, a closer look needs to be given to this position and the person filling it.

This is when the job of District Commissioner can be very interesting. Find out why the person is not meeting expectations. Some of the concerns may be as easily fixed as getting training for the commissioner so he/she will know what the expectations of the job are.

In the case of the commissioner and the unit not getting along, determine if the problem is the commissioner or the unit. If it is the unit, you may choose to keep the commissioner in the position; however, if the problem is the commissioner, you may need to reassign or relieve the commissioner from that position.<sup>(12)</sup>

One of the trickiest problems any District Commissioner may encounter is the commissioner who has a vested interest in the unit, such as being a member of the unit committee or having a son in the unit.

If possible, the unit commissioner should NOT have a vested interest in the unit. It is the job of the unit commissioner to bring an objective outlook to the unit to help them identify their problem.

Once it has been determined that a unit commissioner needs to be reassigned, set up a meeting with the commissioner and his/her assistant district commissioner to review your findings. Assure the commissioner that he/she is a valuable asset to the scouting program. Explain that their talents could best be used in another area. There may be some resistance from the commissioner at first; therefore, you must let them know why you have made your decision.

A commissioner that has been assigned to strong units may be asked to give up a strong unit for a weaker one to keep the commissioner core work load even. Approach this by telling the commissioner that his/her talents are needed to help the weak unit survive. If possible, a unit commissioner should not be assigned more than one-problem unit.

Problems can arise when a commissioner with a vested interest in a unit is asked to step down and go to another unit. Explain that they can stay active with the unit, but someone with an impartial point of view would better serve the unit. Reassure the commissioner that they are very valuable, and you need to use their expertise with another unit.

There may be total resistance from the commissioner, and they may decide to leave the commissioner core altogether. At that time, thank them for doing a wonderful job and find another person to be the commissioner for that unit.

After reviewing the commissioner staff and deciding who should stay with their assigned units(s) and who should be re-assigned, there may be some commissioners that are no longer meeting expectations. These commissioners should be removed from the commissioner staff.

Some reasons for removing a volunteer from the commissioner staff may be bad chemistry, bad politics, or a “Bad-News Bob” having limited scouting information and poor human relations skills.<sup>(13)</sup>

Bad chemistry between the unit commissioner and the unit may be cured by reassignment. If he/she is unable to work with another unit, removal is the best step. Another situation that may best be solved by removing the commissioner is bad chemistry between the unit commissioner and the assistant district commissioner. Bad politics goes hand-in-hand with bad chemistry and this should be handled in the same way.

Not doing the job or doing a bad job is usually the most often used reason for removing a unit commissioner.<sup>(14)</sup> Before removing the unit commissioner, the district commissioner should try and find out why the unit commissioner’s performance is below expectation

Some reasons for poor performance may be:

- the unit commissioner has not been trained
- the unit commissioner is trying to tell the unit what to do instead of letting the unit find its own solution (example “What do you think should be done?” instead of “ This is the way you do it.”)
- the commissioner is not meeting with the unit

- the commissioner is not attending the monthly commissioner's meeting.

Now, let's look at each of these reasons and see if removal is warranted.

- If the person has not been trained, they cannot be expected to know what to do. You should encourage them to go to training. If they refuse or continue to delay going to training, removal is warranted.
- The next may also fall under bad chemistry. If a unit commissioner is telling the unit what to do instead of advising them and letting them find their own solution to their problems, this can be very detrimental. Quick action needs to be taken, or the unit will not accept any advice from any commissioner in the future. You must find out why the unit commissioner is taking a stand and advise them they are not part of the unit. If they refuse to change their ways, removal is justified.
- When unit commissioners fail to meet with their units or attend monthly commissioner meetings on a regular basis, they are not effective. Once you contact the person, and they indicate they will not meet with the unit or come to the monthly commissioner meeting, then they should be removed.

Removing a commissioner is not firing a commissioner.<sup>(15)</sup> The term fired is associated with employment not with volunteer work. Replacement is the correct term. First, set up a meeting with the person. This can be done with a quick phone call. If they ask what the meeting is about, tell them you need to talk. Generally, they are already aware of the need to meet. Select a meeting place that is a neutral setting such as a restaurant. Take someone else with you, usually the Assistant District Commissioner. At the meeting be brief and tell them that you have made a mistake and think that he/she

needs a break. If questioned, be factual. Most importantly, treat them with dignity. After the meeting, avoid gossip and keep whatever transpired at the meeting confidential. If a meeting can not be arranged, then the formal letter is the best avenue to use. It is imperative that the District Executive be kept aware of the situation so as not to be blindsided if the volunteer goes above the District Executive.

## **Where Do I Recruit New Commissioners?**

### *Who Would Make A Good Unit Commissioner?*

When looking for new commissioners, try using this formula for success.

“The right people + the right experience + the right resources + the right approach = desired results.”<sup>(16)</sup>

There are several places to recruit new commissioners. Some are obvious; some are not. Before recruiting a new commissioner, the District Commissioner should know what attributes unit commissioners should have. When a coach recruits for his football team and needs an offensive tackle, he doesn't talk to a small running back.<sup>(17)</sup> The same holds true when looking for a unit commissioner. The district commissioner should have in mind which units need help and what the needs are. Once this is established, they can start the search for the commissioner.

Some of the attributes, but not all, of a good commissioner are good listener, counselor, outgoing, assertive but not aggressive, helpful, set the example by wearing the uniform correctly, be a friend to the unit and be willing to give.<sup>(18)</sup> If there is more than one candidate for the position, use the table below to match the unit needs with the candidate.

<b>Traits/Skills/Qualities</b>	<b>Candidate A</b>	<b>Candidate B</b>
Assertive (not aggressive)		
Perceptive – Observant		
Good Listener		
Strong Scouting Knowledge		
Positive Attitude		
Cheerleader – Motivator		
Good at Setting Priorities		
Disciplined		
Verbal Communication		
Flexible		
Good At Asking questions		
Good at Building Relationships		

Table 1 (19)

There are some red flags to be on the lookout for. Beware of a person who wants to take charge and do everything, someone who will not listen, someone who has problems working with other people, or a person who will go jump the commissioner chain of command at the first sign of a problem and not keep you in the communication loop. These are some of the qualities that must be met before selecting a unit commissioner. Most

importantly, do not select a person just to be a “warm body” to fill a slot. The wrong person will cause more problems between a unit and the district than no person at all.

### *How Should A Prospect Be Approached?*

Now that there are qualified prospects to fill the position, the hard part comes, asking them. There are several tried and proven ways; I'll only cover a couple that I found are successful. First, make an appointment to meet with the candidate. This appointment should be away from office or home settings. Phone calls or other interruptions can interfere with the “sale”. When making the appointment, just say there is a scouting matter that you want their opinion on. When setting up the meeting, telling the candidate there is a need for commissioners and they have been chosen could bring an automatic “NO”. Pick a meeting place where discussion can take place. It is important the reason this person has been selected to be a commissioner be discussed early in the meeting. It is also helpful if the assistant district commissioner that the candidate will be working with attends the meeting. It may make the candidate feel more at ease if there is help readily available besides the district commissioner. Discuss what will be expected of them and let them know that there is help available. They will not be out on their own. If the person has not said yes or no and wants to think about it, set up a time to get with them again. Try to avoid a telephone call. I have found this is the best method of recruiting.(20)

Another way to successfully recruit a commissioner is to invite the candidate to a Commissioner Basic Training session and let them find out what a



commissioner's responsibilities are. They may have no idea what a commissioner does, or they may have a misconception of what a commissioner's role is.

Training can clear up these problems and make it clear to them. There are several other ways to ask a person to be a commissioner; the two mentioned above have been the most successful for me.

### ***Where Does A New Unit Commissioner Get Training?***

Now that a need for a commissioner has been identified, and one has been recruited, the next step is training. The new commissioners will not be able to meet the expected responsibilities without proper training. Unless, as previously stated, the commissioner came to you through Commissioner Basic Training, the first step is Fast Start video. This will give them an idea of what to do.<sup>(21)</sup> Contact your council to find out when and where the next Commissioner Basic Training will be held. Make sure the new commissioner knows when and where the training is being held. If it is not possible for them to attend that training, find out when the next training is being held. Don't accept excuses why they cannot attend training. For continuing education, attend "The College of Commissioner Science".

## **Summary**

To summarize, a three-step approach to attaining a proactive commissioner staff is best. First, review the units to see if the units are strong or weak and identify if there is a commissioner assigned to the units.

Second, review the present staff and determine if the commissioners are fulfilling their responsibilities. Ask yourself if they are properly assigned or could they be better

utilized with another unit. If they are not carrying out their responsibilities, removal may need to be done.

Finally, recruiting new commissioners is an ongoing process. New commissioners are needed to ensure that all units have a commissioner to help and support them. New commissioners can come from many places such as unit committees, unit leaders stepping down, and a Scouter wanting to get back into the program. Using this document as a guide and with the assistance of the professional staff, you are well on the way to having a strong functional commissioner staff.

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